

June 29 2005 - GOP Ethics Retreat Deja Vu

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Republicans Back Peddle on Ethics...Again

Washington, DC - Rep. Doc Hastings (R-WA) today released a Dear Colleague letter which attempted to misrepresent his sudden and full retreat on the dispute over Ethics Committee staffing rules, and his unwillingness to follow established Committee rules.

In the letter sent to Members of Congress, Rep. Hastings finally agreed in writing to follow the rules of the Ethics Committee that allow for the appointment of a non-partisan staff director or chief counsel. In his letter, Chairman Hastings erroneously suggested that had been his position all along and the Committee's Ranking Member, Alan Mollohan (D-WV), had been keeping the panel from doing its work.

"This is a victory for Ethics and is the third time in 6 months the American people have embarrassed the Republican Leadership into an about face on their plans to destroy the Ethics process. When will they learn?," said Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee." She added, "The Republicans are as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs...and they darn well should be."

"Rep. Mollohan has stood up for the integrity of the House and should be commended for his Herculean effort to preserve the non-partisan nature of the House Ethics Committee. Chairman Hastings has finally caved to the mounting public pressure both here in Washington and in his district," Rep. Slaughter stated.

"We are six months into the 109th Congress and the Ethics Committee has operated for just one day," said Rep. Slaughter. She continued, "I am saddened that it has taken the hard work of so many to convince Chairman Hastings to follow the rules and allow the process to move forward. We should always remember that it's easy to make the right decision when the whole world is watching. What defines our character is what we do when no one is watching."

GOP Bitter in Retreat

In response to Rep. Hastings' attempts to misrepresent his own retreat on the staffing issue, Rep. Slaughter stated, "It's a shame that each time the Republicans get caught with their hands in the cookie jar, they start telling tall tales. This attempt by Doc Hastings and the Republicans to rewrite history won't succeed, just as their previous attempts to confuse and misdirect the American people on this issue have failed."

In his letter Chairman Hastings references a May 12, 2005 "offer" made to Ranking Member Mollohan which he now falsely claims was a return to the "same staffing model used at the committee in recent years by both Democrats and Republicans."

But in the May 12th edition of Roll Call, Hastings' offer was described differently and Congressman Mollohan made his position very clear. A position which was obviously different from that of Rep. Hastings:

"Hastings wants to avoid a repeat of the long battle over GOP-drafted ethics rules changes that prevented the committee from organizing during the March and April, preferring to settle this dispute privately. Even so, the Evergreen State Republican views Cassidy's role with the committee as critical as he moves to assert his authority over the panel."

In an interview on Wednesday, Mollohan said the ethics committee rules are "simple and forthright" - namely, Cassidy and Mary McCarty, Hastings' own liaison to the committee, can have no authority over the professional staff of the ethics committee. The two are allowed to monitor its activities and report back to the chairman and ranking member, but they cannot issue any directives or orders to investigators or other professional staff.

The rules are simple, their intent is clear, and the mischief that can happen if you operate outside the rules is clearly apparent," Mollohan said.

And the next day, May 13, 2005, when no agreement had been reached, National Journal had this to say:

No deals were announced Thursday that despite a lengthy meeting between House Ethics Chairman Hastings and ranking member Alan Mollohan, D-W.Va., to try to reach agreements on a series of disputes before the panel.

Hastings and Mollohan appear to have interpretive differences over committee rules that govern staff roles on the panel -- a minor but significant issue that might prevent the panel from hiring additional investigative staff until it is resolved.

Rep. Mollohan released a Dear Colleague letter in response which sets the record straight on this important issue.

Background (Release from June 14, 2005):

Ethics Showdown: Here We Go Again

Rep. Slaughter Demands GOP Ethics Chief Step Aside

Rules Committee Ranking Member Seeks Action in Stalled Committee

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY), Ranking Member of the House Committee on Rules, responded this afternoon to Republican Ethics Committee Chairman Doc Hastings' rejection of tradition by refusing to name a non-partisan committee staff director. His actions have led to a virtual stand still delaying any work in the Committee for the second time in just six months. The Rules Committee has jurisdiction

"Chairman Hastings' refusal to follow tradition and keep the staff of the Ethics Committee non-partisan is just another attempt by the Republican Majority to politicize the committee and subvert the Ethics process of Congress for the benefit of one man," said Rep. Slaughter.

Even more troubling are the ties between Chairman Hastings and notorious Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff reported in last week's Houston Chronicle. According to their reporting, Hastings had an ongoing relationship with Preston Gates, the same law firm that employed Abramoff.

"The Republican Majority will do everything in their power to bend the Ethics Committee into submission. First they changed the rules. Then they fired the staff. Now, their own Chairman is trying to unilaterally replace the non-partisan professional staff with his handpicked team of Republican operatives," continued Rep. Slaughter. "Enough is enough. It is time for Chairman Hastings to step aside. The Ethics Committee deserves more than partisan political power plays."

BACKGROUND

In the opening days of Congress, Republicans were lambasted for attempting to change their conference rules to protect members of their own leadership (cough...DeLay) should they ever be indicted. Republicans also proposed removing a long standing provision of House Ethics Rules that stipulated members of Congress must conduct themselves, "at all times in a manner that shall reflect creditably on the House". Faced with overwhelming criticism they dropped both of these provisions creating the smoke screen of defeat only to hammer through dramatic changes to Ethics Rules days later. These changes to the rules are what Democrats in Congress fought successfully to overturn in late April after a four

month battle with House Republicans. Prior to the reversal Republicans had done the following:

- Created a rule that would dismiss any complaint the evenly split, bi-partisan Ethics Committee deadlocks on. This measure provided an effective 'veto' for the Majority over any ethics complaint filed. The previous (now restored) language placed the item into an automatic investigative subcommittee if agreement could not be reached in the allotted time frame.

- Changed the rules that would eliminate the 45-day deadline for action by the Ethics Committee on any complaint before them. This change enabled the committee to "bury" politically sensitive ethics complaints indefinitely. The previous (now restored) language was created in the interest of providing timely resolutions to ethics complaints before the committee.